

ANIA DABROWSKA

A Lebanese Archive

LONDON METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY
THE SCHOOL OF ART, ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

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Project details

Output author	**Ania Dabrowska**
Collaborators	**Diab Alkarssifi, Contributing Photographer and Collector.**
Project title	***A Lebanese Archive***
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Figure 2. Ania Dabrowska, Untitled 15. clockwise: Botros Rizq, military training, 1970s; Hasan Flaha, hunting trip, 1986; Diab's brother, Baalbeck Temple, early 1984, all by Diab Alkarssifi, Lebanon, Collection of Diab Alkarssifi, *Drift / Resolution*, 2014.







Figure 3. Ania Dabrowska, Untitled 16. clockwise: Cable cars, Russia, 1970s; Funeral of a war fighter, Lebanon, Diab Alkarssifi, 1977; Freemasons' meeting, Baalbeck Photo Print Studio, 1940s/50s, Collection of Diab Alkarssifi, *Drift/Resolution*, 2013.

Research content and significance

DESCRIPTION

A Lebanese Archive is a practice based research project about a collection of archival photographs from the Middle East in the form of authored book, photographic series, exhibitions, public engagement programme and project website presented to global audiences from 2010 until present.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How does a collection become an archive?
- What are the problems surrounding authorship and ownership of archives?
- What is lost, changed or gained in the translation of photographic archives?
- What is the archival agency and cultural diplomacy of an archive in its ability to restage a global cultural perspective?

PROCESS

This work follows my long-standing interest in processes that impact the formation of collective and personal memory which informs production of work and practice-based research through a combination of personal, collaborative and participatory methodologies using mediums of photography, moving image, sound and installations.

DISSEMINATION

The project was developed following a discovery of the archival collection at the Arlington homeless people hostel in Camden, where I was a SPACE Studios artist in residence 2010-2012. It launched in 2013 with the *Conversations About Archive* exhibition, Four Corners Gallery, London, followed by a research trip to Lebanon and an artist's residency with Ashkal Alwan in Beirut in 2014. The book was launched in 2015 and led to an exhibition commission comprising a new body of photographic work together with archival material at the Nottingham Contemporary Gallery in 2017-2018.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

At the time of growing political tensions in Syria and across the Middle East in 2013, the project attracted attention of mainstream global media for its portrayal of an alternative view of life in the Middle East as well as artists and researchers who were interested in referencing it in their own work.

Introduction

A Lebanese Archive is a visual arts and cultural heritage project which was inspired by a collection of 27,000 photographs belonging to a former Lebanese photojournalist, Diab Alkarssifi. It culminated in multiple outputs, centred around an exhibition and an authored book *A Lebanese Archive: From the Collection of Diab Alkarssifi* (2015) produced in partnership with Book Works, London and the Arab Image Foundation, Beirut.

Covering over 100 years of cultural and political history of Lebanon and the Middle East (c.1889 – 1993), the Alkarssifi collection consists of photographs from three sources: Diab's personal work, collected family albums, and photographs from several small photographic studios. We see the history of three generations of the Alkarssifi family, the Baalbek community and his student life in 1970s Moscow and Budapest, all set against public narratives of political and military conflict.

The collection was split up when he immigrated to the UK in 1993, bringing as much as he could carry with him to London. It was hidden for 17 years, until 2010 when Diab Alkarssifi brought it to my studio at Arlington, a landmark London hostel for homeless men and women where I was running an engagement programme and where Diab Alkarssifi was resident at the time.

The project aimed to preserve the Alkarssifi collection and to explore the impact of archives in a wider contemporary context. It was produced in form of successive artistic and curatorial responses, disseminated over time across international locations - as an artist book, a digital archive, a touring exhibition of work inspired by the collection and a public engagement programme including lectures, talks, workshops, critical exchanges with other archival initiatives in Beirut, London and Poland. It was my aim to see how the project evolves over time following a key question of an interdependence of authorship, ownership and agency of this archival material when contextualised in these multi-platform works, over time and in different locations.

We are not supposed to believe that a treasure might one day unexpectedly land on our doorstep. Yet, this is precisely what happened when Diab Alkarssifi's collection came into my life in 2010. I had just started a residency at Arlington, London and when he visited my studio, bringing two big bags filled with negatives and photographic prints, I was intrigued by the content of the bags, and no less by the man who stood before me.





Figure 4 & 5. Ania Dabrowska, Documentation of working on Diab Alkarssifi's Archive, SPACE STUDIOS, London, 2014

Research context

Diab Alkarssifi was born in Baalbek, Lebanon in 1951, into a land and family that has survived many wars. He contracted polio during his childhood and the resulting disability later saved him from being drafted into the army. Instead, he became a photographer working for a local communist party paper.

In one of the conversations I recorded, Diab explained, “For many years these photographs were hidden. In these bags lay my life and passion, but I often wondered if that really mattered and what I could do with them. After we started working together, I felt as if I remembered myself again. I kept this archive safe for many decades. Now, the forgotten lives, friends that died, places and ideas that no longer existed, were brought back. The light was shining on them again.”

The question of when a collection becomes an archive has been repetitively broken down in recent years due to changes in exhibition practice. Discourse around this subject focuses on Benjamin’s concept of ‘afterlife’ (Nachleben), in the context of the changing artistic function of documentation. It thus asks, ‘What does the becoming art of documentation have to tell us about the historical ontology of the artwork, and its relations to the practices of collecting and archiving?’ (Osborne, 2015). The process of recording and interpreting the spatial, temporal qualities of the collection thus allows us to present it as the afterlife of the specific context in which it relates too - ‘In this respect, the work includes its own documentation and, to the extent that it proliferates and its materialisations are collected, its own archive’ (Osborne, 2015). Each particular manifestation of the archive through its curatorial practice preserves the works in a new setting, and thus with a new afterlife. It is the porosity and temporality of each new representation of an archive that gives life to the object, whether it is authentic or artificial. (Groys, 2008)

Working with the collection often reminded me of Borges’s *Garden of Forking Paths* (1941). There were many ‘meaningful coincidences’, moments of serendipity, thresholds through which one could approach it, seemingly endless possibilities of orienting oneself and developing a project. Every time I focus on links between memory and construction of identity, I marvel at how we repeat certain stories like incantations to anchor our own existence. We mix fact and fiction, more or less conscious of the fact that we are doing it or of keeping a balance between the two polarities, and then, through an institutional contextualisation we validate

these constructed fictions as “archives”. The photographic medium seems to have been invented to aid us in this. It reinforces these connections by allowing us to frame them through canonical templates which I was determined to critique, integrate and intervene into. Amongst the photographs that came from the commercial photographic studios, many had no annotations that would identify photographer, sitters, time or place. We found passport and studio portraits, uncollected holiday snaps, and photographs of public social events, including visits of state dignitaries and monarchs. People come and go, reflecting changes in fashion, attitude, and politics in the bustling cities of Baalbek, Beirut, Damascus, and Cairo.

Stripping the archival material from all documentary data (no captions, dates or locations) allows these interventions to step aside documentary traditions, and take the images to the realm of “pure form”. I’m relating some of S. I. Witkiewicz’s philosophical approach and theory of theatre and music to the construction of these photographic works and their dissemination. Pure form is ‘that which imparts a certain unity to complex objects and phenomena.’ When this unifying takes place and leads to aesthetic satisfaction, it is pure form (Witkiewicz, 1973). The unity of the individual, both as artist in creating and as spectator in perceiving the pure form allows spectators to experience the artist’s ‘heightened metaphysical feeling’ in a sense related to their own individual condition (Barlow, 2014).

“Only in isolated instances has it been possible to grasp the historical content of a work of art in such a way that it becomes more transparent to us as a work of art.” (Benjamin, 1937)

Research process

My approach to this project is rooted in photography and visual art practice with interest in photographic medium, memory, archives and society. The key research underpinning *A Lebanese Archive* exists in the borderline between archiving and visual art; the innovation of this is embedded in the method through which I migrate the collection, 'write with it and through it' (Zaatari, 2015) stimulating conversations about the agency, authorship, ownership and power of this archive in contemporary context.

My encounter with Alkarssifi's collection, in a context of two migrant identities meeting in London (my own and that of the collection), became a starting point for a journey that combined contemporary art and curatorial practices. This chance encounter gave birth to the archiving of a huge collection, and the development of a new body of work, and through it to giving a new meaning to Alkarssifi's collection.

Whilst working towards securing a place for these photographs in an established archival institution specialising in a preservation of Middle East photographic heritage (The Arab Image Foundation), my primary interest as an artist was to use these photographs as a catalysts for interventions and investigations of the present, taking a role of cultural explorer, probing the cracks in the personal memory of the collection's owner, legitimising both facts and fictional narratives embedded in this archive. I edited archival stories and fabricated new narratives, setting them against a backdrop of post-war history of Europe and the Middle East, with curiosity about cultural and political relationship between them. My interpretation and arrangement of the archive with my own imagery and assemblages has led to a layering of the work inspired by their conversations on history, photography and personal memory.

I started with pragmatic matters. How exactly does a collection become an archive? Noting the frequency of certain themes of tradition, family, and the lives of people close to Diab, I started looking at narrative patterns and the construction of different types of stories. By focusing on a structural analysis, I hoped to objectify these stories enough to liberate myself from their embedded chronology and a historically driven order. I could also focus on a conceptual dimension of the project and let that inspire a different way of reading. Working closely with Alkarssifi involved a careful and time-consuming process of digitising the archive, recording of back stories about photographs and conversations about the archive between myself and Diab.





Figure 6. Ania Dabrowska, Documentation of Diab Alkarssifi's Archival Prints, 2014

Figure 7. Ania Dabrowska, Studio documentation of Ania Dabrowska and Diab Alkarssifi working on the book, 2014.

RESEARCH TRIP

In the course of the project I went to Lebanon twice, funded by the Arts Council and other international funders. In October 2013, I travelled with Diab, to retrieve the missing part of the collection from Baalbeck and to locate the archive physically and geographically. When we got to Baalbeck, to our surprise the room was empty, the rest of the archive gone – apparently stolen by someone just before our arrival. Any archive I've worked with has always led me towards the fragments, a breakdown of continuity, an omission, a grey area. It's this grey area that was exciting to me, because this is the space that we can fill with imagination. I attempted therefore to "locate the archive" through my eyes, my camera lens and sound recordings. I retraced some of the known locations in the archival photographs and shot what I considered to be metaphorical interpretations of an archive.

I went again in April–May 2014 for an artist's residency at Ashkal Alwan in Beirut to pursue the dialogues about archives with new contacts in Beirut and Baalbeck. During my residency, I expanded questions engaged in the *A Lebanese Archive* book to ontological considerations of an archive and its relationship with time, territory, and materiality. I created a new series of works, using photography in its expanded field to explore multiple geographic and personal journeys: the initial one into Alkarssifi's photographic archive, the trips to Lebanon, as well as the interrogations these events inspired in my practice. I made the city my studio. I walked every day, exploring and photographing the city and its people. I interviewed family and friends, some of those within the archival photographs in order to further contextualise the archive within my practice as an artist, working with the themes of personal and cultural identity. I talked to people on the streets as well as interviewing artists, galleries, cultural entrepreneurs and institutions invested in preservation of cultural heritage and in the country's cultural recovery from the years of conflict about the collection's resonance and agency.

Part of the project involved working with some of Alkarssifi's images at a microscopic level, looking at their materiality, and how the archive has been damaged as result of poor chemical processing, mishandling and non-archival storage over the years. Once I started working on a condition report of the most damaged of the photographic prints and negatives in this way, I was struck by visual and symbolic analogies between those marks and the damage that marked Beirut, the city:

bullet holed scarred buildings, ruins and half build new developments and abandoned houses. I was struck by an appreciation of an archive as something that encompasses historical traces and indexicality whilst also being a living and evolving entity.



Figure 8. Ania Dabrowska, Ania Dabrowska and Diab Alkarssifi in Beeka Valley, Lebanon, Research Trip, 2013.



Figure 9. Diab Alkarssifi, Ania Dabrowska at Baalbeck Temple, research trip, Lebanon 2013.



Figure 10. Photographer Unknown, from a collection of Diab Alkarssifi, Baalbeck Festival, Baalbeck, Lebanon 1970s, 2015.



Figure 11. Ania Dabrowska, Diab Alkarssifi's family home, Baalbeck Research Trip, Lebanon, 2013.

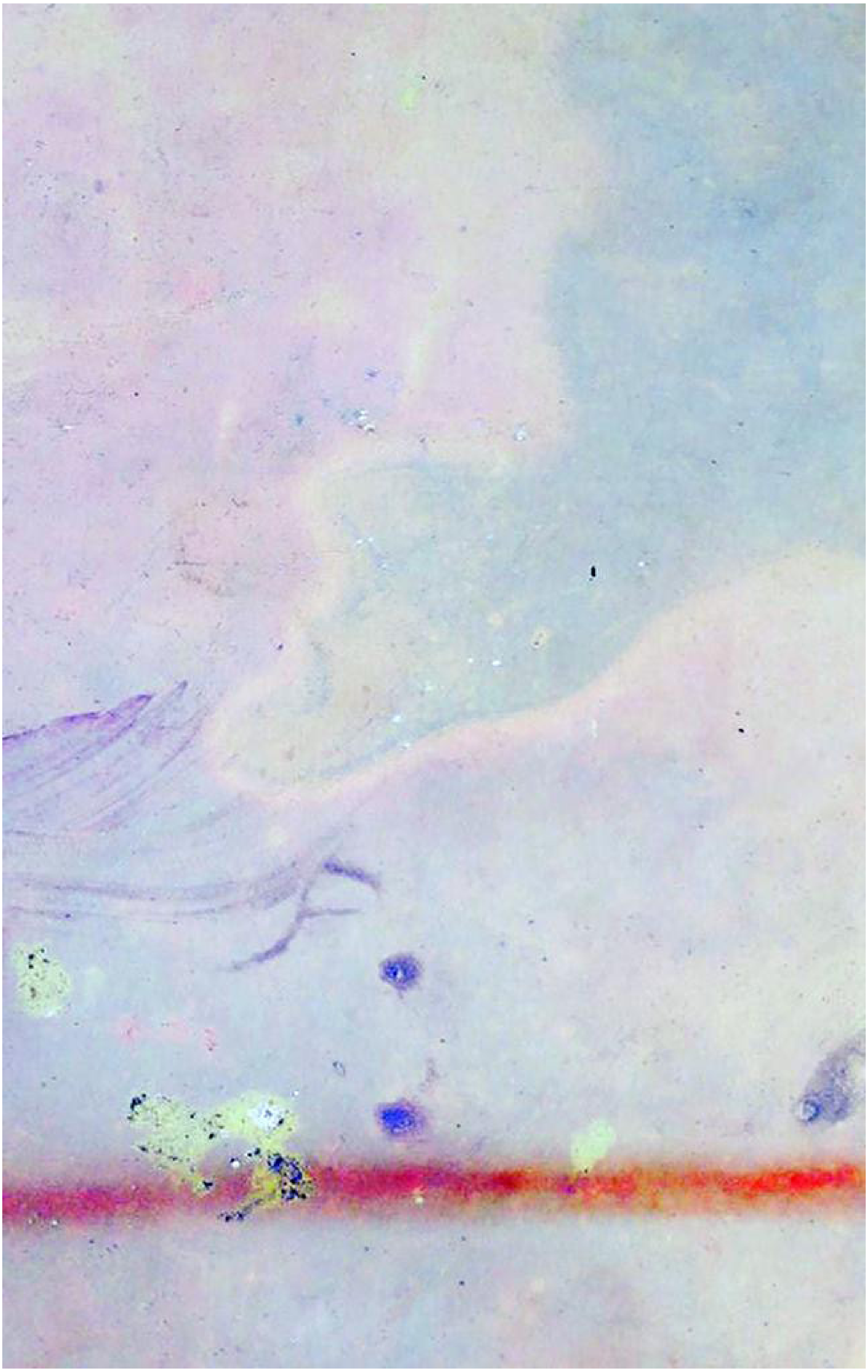


Figure 12. Ania Dabrowska, Archive 3, Surface of a photographic print c.1980, Dye Stain, Microscope Imaging at Arab Image Foundation, Beirut, 2014.

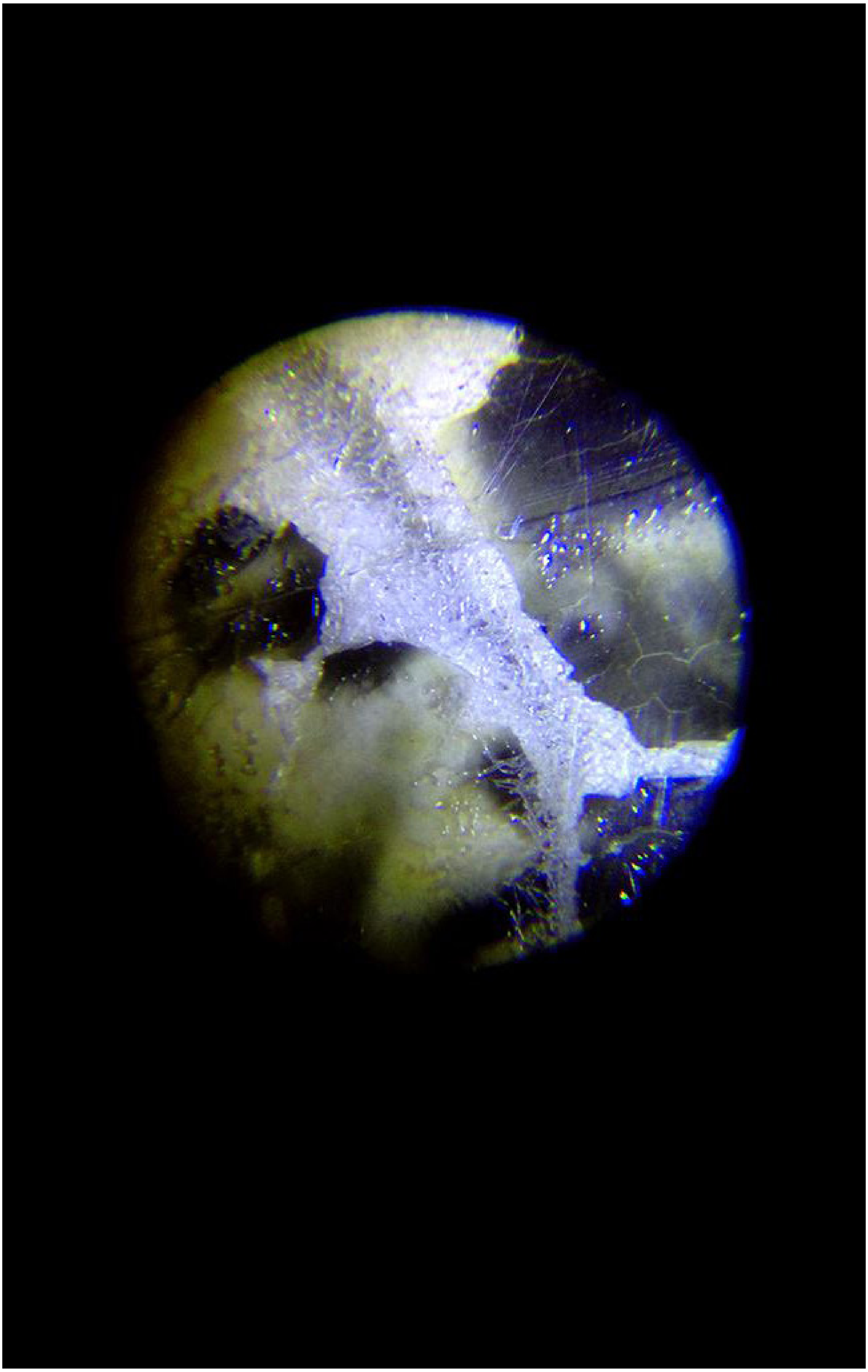


Figure 13. Ania Dabrowska, Archive 2,
Surface of a photographic print c.1950s,
Crack, Microscope Imaging at Arab Image
Foundation, Beirut, 2014.





Figure 14 & 15. Ania Dabrowska, Fog I,
Fog II, Ouyoun Al Siman Mountains, Beeka
Valley, Lebanon, 2013.



Figure 16. Ania Dabrowska, Archive, Ouyoun Al Siman Mountains, Beeka Valley, Lebanon 2013.

BOOK

A Lebanese Archive book comprises photographs from this archival collection and the new works created by me, punctuated by short transcripts of conversations between Diab and myself on the history and making of the images and stories collected here. The book is introduced and reflected on in texts by Akram Zaatari and myself.

The development of the book took place at the *Conversations about Archive* exhibition at the Four Corners Gallery, London. Part of the exhibition space was staged as a studio, where I worked with graphic designer, Kelly Weedon. Exhibition visitors were invited to participate in discussions, to look at any artifacts brought to the space for the day and to watch the development process. The exhibition space changed each day as our work progressed and the content was different at every visit.

The book is formatted into three distinct sections. A series of compositions (*Drift/ Resolution*), Archive Stories and a series of my own new work responding to the archive.

Drift/Resolution is a series of composites including grids, triptychs and diptychs created with images from the collection. The photographs are taken out of their context, stripped of dates, captions and history, and then repositioned in a seemingly random order to echo the way our memory works and to allow a meditation on the power of photography to evoke storylines. The apparent randomness is illusionary: the arrangements are carefully constructed, like all archival orders. The groupings also reflect the nature of the archive: looking through rolls of films and unedited digital folders was like looking at someone's stream of consciousness or storyboards of dreams. The films were mixed up, coming in and out of each other. I'd frequently find stray negative strips from one narrative inserted into a contact sheet of another. By stripping them from factual information and grouping them as non-linear time loops, I wanted to disrupt an assumption of factual reliability of photographs as records of history within this archive and to put the depicted socio-political narratives in a new light. The series addresses our capacity to synthesize meaning by identifying and by generating connections between images within the newly created sets.

In creating these works, I selected images that appealed to me and then spent time figuring out what connected them in the new proximities. I organised these photographs according to formal and thematic homologies. The truths









Figure 17. Ania Dabrowska, *A Lebanese Archive book*, 2015 Image: courtesy of Kelly Weedon (graphic designer).

Figure 18 - 20. Ania Dabrowska, *Conversations About Archive* exhibition, live studio set up, Four Corners Gallery, London, 2013,

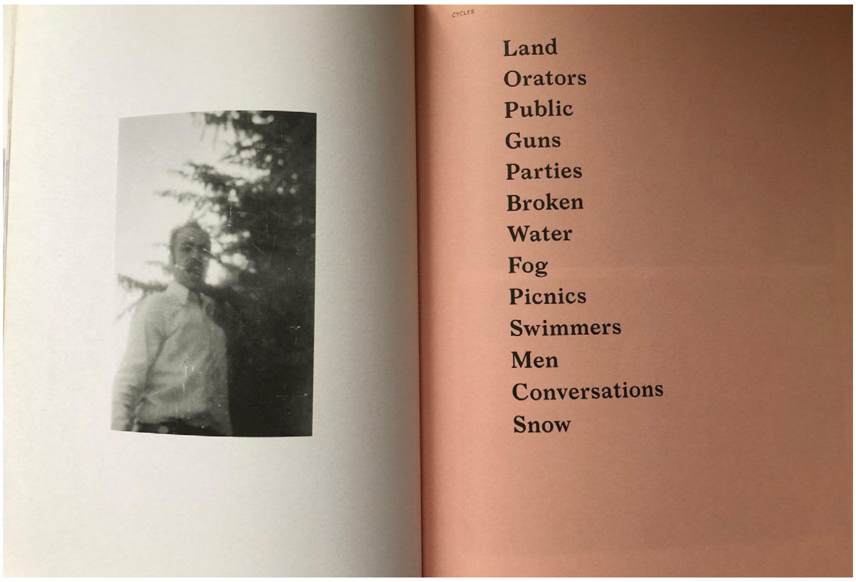
about symbols, signs, figures, meaning in the pictures and the connections between the images can only be assumed or imagined. There is no guidance but plenty of possible readings. The sets tease out questions about how political, social, and cultural agencies of power (in its varied forms: that of the state, personal, gendered, traditions, ideology, family, friendship, love, conflict, fear etc.) are manifested and concealed in the everyday.

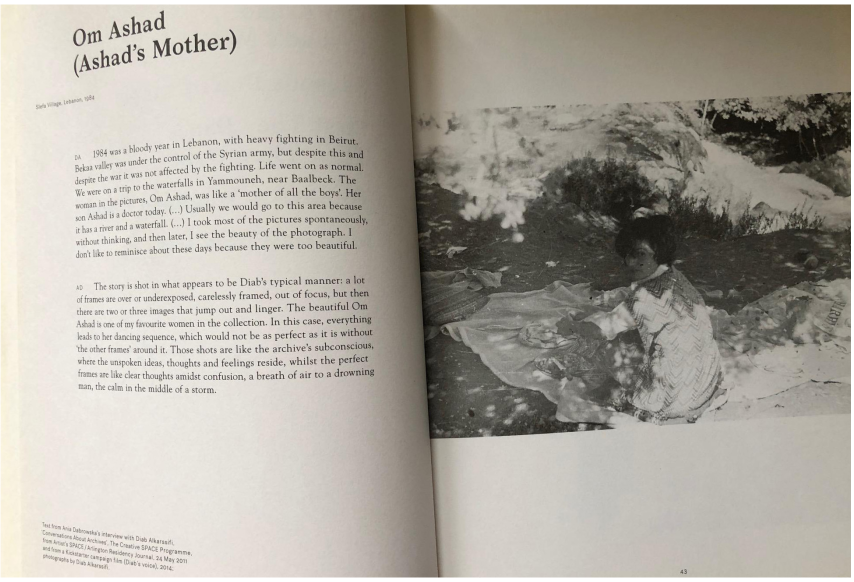
"The effect complements both the pictorially absurd – black and white figures in bathing suits share the horizon of a page with army officials with skis strapped to their boots – and the bleak: documentation of a funeral for Red Cross Workers who 'were murdered by treachery', according to Alkarssifi. His words are striking when read alongside an image so overexposed that the faces of six mourners are rendered illegible. Their silhouettes, starkly lit against a bright white sky, are elevated above the anonymous photographer who is instead eye-level with a thick strip of dirt, as if the picture is taken from inside a grave." (Sykes, 2015)

I believe that stories are one of the key ways in which we communicate with each other to make sense of the world and of ourselves. In our conversations Diab revealed a longing for a lost sense of belonging. Talking about the stories associated with the photographs was a way of regaining a sense of himself. In *Archive Stories* I apply a curatorial method to the artistic process, using traditional editorial techniques. This time, I construct linear narratives and respect the continuity of time. The stories are framed by short contextualising texts, dated and captioned in a documentary manner. I orbit as close as possible to the impossibility of 'truth'.

"One such sequence records a scene that wouldn't look out of place in an impressionist oil painting: a summer picnic. Photographs of blankets splayed under trees in search of shade document a day out that ends with men dancing in Levi's. In the final image of the sequence, a woman whose name, we are told, is Om Ashad, raises her glass to us. Bourgeois bon temps is soon juxtaposed with a series of images that show people taking to the street to demonstrate against President Al-Sadat; in front of their unsmiling faces are megaphones that remain eerily silent." (Sykes, 2015)







Om Ashad
(Ashad's Mother)

Slefa Village, Lebanon, 1984

DA 1984 was a bloody year in Lebanon, with heavy fighting in Beirut. Bekaa valley was under the control of the Syrian army, but despite this and despite the war it was not affected by the fighting. Life went on as normal. We were on a trip to the waterfalls in Yammouneh, near Baalbeck. The woman in the pictures, Om Ashad, was like a 'mother of all the boys'. Her son Ashad is a doctor today. (...) Usually we would go to this area because it has a river and a waterfall. (...) I took most of the pictures spontaneously, without thinking, and then later, I see the beauty of the photograph. I don't like to reminisce about these days because they were too beautiful.

AD The story is shot in what appears to be Diab's typical manner: a lot of frames are over or underexposed, carelessly framed, out of focus, but then there are two or three images that jump out and linger. The beautiful Om Ashad is one of my favourite women in the collection. In this case, everything leads to her dancing sequence, which would not be as perfect as it is without 'the other frames' around it. Those shots are like the archive's subconscious, where the unspoken ideas, thoughts and feelings reside, whilst the perfect frames are like clear thoughts amidst confusion, a breath of air to a drowning man, the calm in the middle of a storm.

Text from Ania Dabrowska's interview with Diab Alkarssifi, 'Conversations About Archives', The Creative SPACE Programme, from Artist's SPACE / Arlington Residency Journal, 24 May 2011 and from a Kickstarter campaign film (Diab's voice), 2014; photographs by Diab Alkarssifi.

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Figure 21. Ania Dabrowska, Excerpts of Drift/Resolution and *Archive Stories* from *A Lebanese Archive* book, 2015.





Figure 22. Ania Dabrowska, *A Lebanese Archive* book scans, 2015.

EXHIBITION

A more recent configuration of the project was displayed at the *From Ear to Ear to Eye* exhibition, curated by Sam Thorne and Angelica Sule. The exhibition presented perspectives on complex questions of harmony and violence, traversing very different cities, practices and experiences. The Arab world is often relayed to us via images of catastrophe, such as the refugee crisis, civil war, terrorism and humanitarian disaster. In contrast to this, the artworks in the show are considered as tools of power and resistance, as ways to silence as well as to give voice.

My lead interest here was how could I, as a contemporary artist, migrate Diab's archive (or with Diab's archive) across time and place, mapping memories of the process, encountered territories, conflicts embedded in the artistic practice of interpretation whilst resisting mainstream narratives about the Arab world.

I created an immersive installation of these multiple geographic and personal journeys – the initial one into Alkarssifi's archive, the resulting trips to Lebanon, as well as the interrogations these events inspired in my practice. A multi-part display included both archive and contemporary photos that probe material and metaphorical understanding of this archive: including macro investigations of photographic prints (made in the conservation department of Arab Image Foundation), photographs of archival objects, artifacts and the places I visited in Lebanon, a three-screen rotating display of 1,500 images, which expanded, animated and randomized the precise and carefully considered *Drift/ Resolution* compositions of the book, and vitrines showing Alkarssifi's original prints accompanied by my notations and codifications.

"I think there is something in the power that archives give artists … and it goes beyond looking back and referencing the old. There is some kind of agency that we possess: by the retelling of archival stories, we have the power to articulate new ideas of who we want to be identified as, or how we want to formulate our own identities" (Dabrowska, 2017).





Figure 23 & 24. Stuart Whipps, Ania Dabrowska's A Lebanese Archive installation, *From Ear to Ear to Eye*, Nottingham Contemporary Gallery, 2017-18

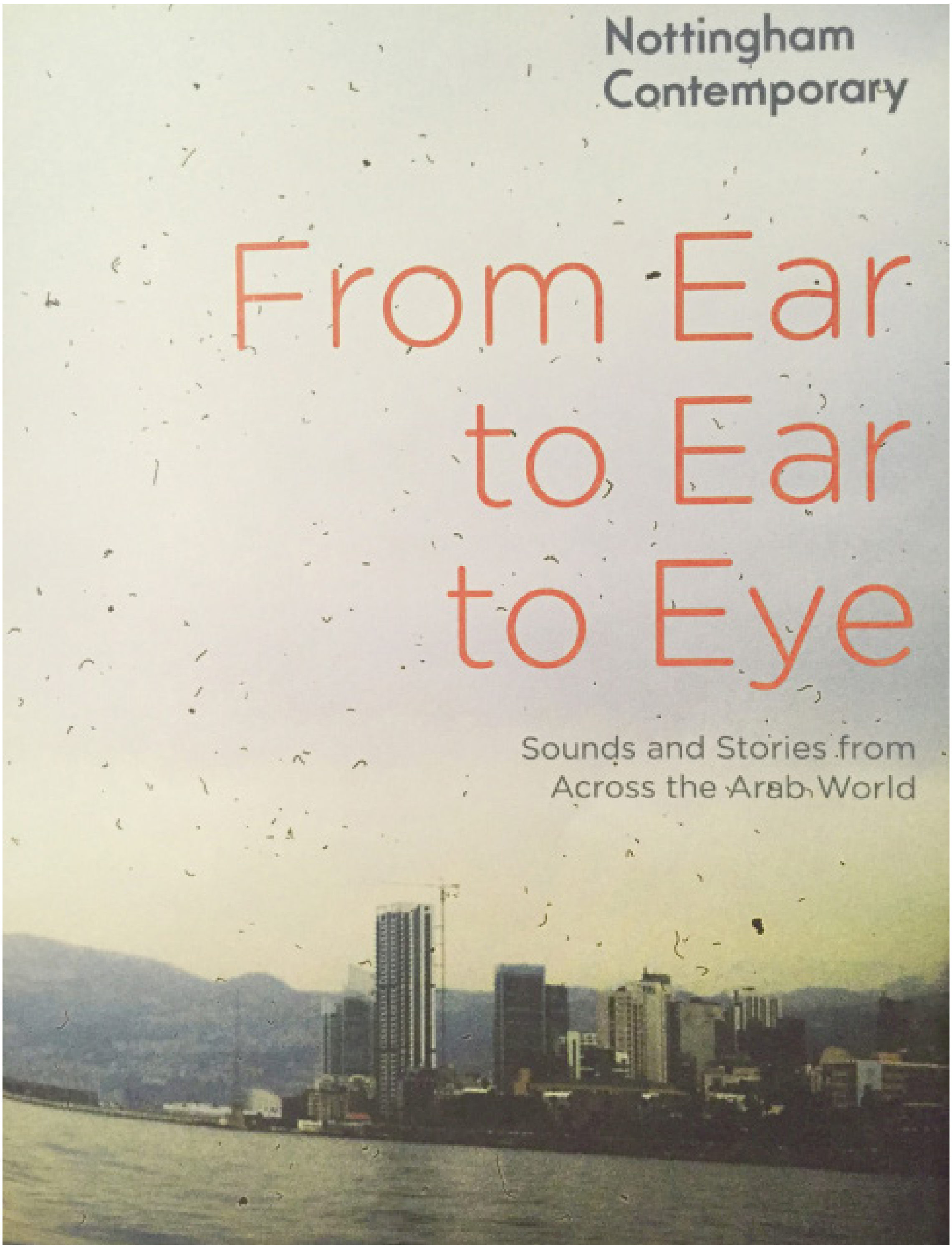


Figure 25. *From Ear To Ear To Eye*,
Nottingham Contemporary, exhibition flyer,
2017-2018.





Figure 26. Ania Dabrowska, Archive 1, Negative wraps of Diab Alkarssifi, Arlington Hostel, London, 2013.

Figure 27. Stuart Whipps, Ania Dabrowska's cataloguing system for *A Lebanese Archive* book, *From Ear to Ear to Eye*, Nottingham Contemporary Gallery, 2017-18

Research insights

A Lebanese Archive is a project about a collection of photographs belonging to an ordinary man with a passion for collecting photography and a story situated within a particular social and historical context: civil wars, forced migration, displacement and Diab's homelessness. It is a project about a process of an artist transforming this collection into an archive and contemporary artwork.

Beyond our shared humanist views and passion for photography, myself and Diab were both migrants living in the UK with a past experience of communism. I was born and grew up in communist Poland, Diab was involved in the communist party of Lebanon. When unpacking the collection, even though we were looking at photographs from the Middle East in the past, we were both re-affirming what home meant for us in the present; a process particularly relevant in the shared context of our migrant belonging.

I've always been interested in archives. The complicated questions about personal and collective memory and how these impact on our sense of identity frequently appear in my work. I've repeatedly attempted to look in two directions at once: turning to the past while trying to make sense of something in the present. Archives – and particularly for me photographic archives – embody these themes. I've been fascinated in photography's potential to distort or erase our histories on one hand whilst sustaining or inventing versions of our lives on the other.

Prior to the residency at Arlington, I had been thinking a lot about photographic memory in a literal sense: how memory might be contained physically or virtually within and on the surface of the photographic medium, and how narratives might embed themselves in and beyond the images captured on the film. Or, how the medium in all its fragile materiality stores and distorts this information, and then, how we might relate to it, use it and misuse it. This is when Diab's collection came into my hands. In developing *A Lebanese Archive*, I considered these questions in a new light.

ARCHIVAL AGENCY AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

Diab was a self-taught, obsessive photographer of everything he saw and of everyone around him. His proximity to the subjects creates an intimate portrait of real people, a poetic documentation of life told in the first person. We see babies being born, children going to school, weddings, people growing old, and death, in a cycle of winters, summers, and springs. This ground level vision of tenderness and closeness is easy to connect to because of the simultaneous impact of the narratives and the work's aesthetic. The common nature of many scenes depicted in the photographs makes them instantly familiar because of our own experience of family albums. Yet, unlike ordinary family albums, we get an insight into all layers of life, a spectrum of emotions, action, stillness, and the mundane. We see washing lines, empty courtyards, buckets, flocks of birds, and other details of the everyday. He is equally interested in this as he is in the way his community reacts to the continuous social unrest and wars and it is this that provides an alternative and relatable view of life in the Middle East that contrasted the mainstream representations of conflict at the time.

Through ordering these pictures, I wanted to ritualise the everyday, to find a way of liberating Diab and his subjects, a way of amplifying a sense of understanding of how people come to terms with the perpetual presence of conflict. By looking for repetitions of similar stories I wanted to find reassurance, narrative continuity, whereas fragmentation of the historical narrative which is pushed to the background, reflected to me the instability of political rhetoric. This shift of perspective on history takes us back to the project's conceptual context. What has been distinctive for me about working with Alkarssifi's archive to begin with, is that it took me not so much back in time or to a new territory, but home again, to a place that was simultaneously familiar and new. Even though we are looking at images of the past, we are re-affirming what home means for us in the present, a process particularly relevant in a context of political and economic upheavals or migrant displacement.

"Ania's encounter with Diab is at once intense and ambitious as it takes place across all of those territories (in the sense it takes place across different cultures and times and practices). It is an evocative encounter, so inspiring and so enriching to her. With his photographs in mind she writes her own" (Zaatari, 2015)

OWNERSHIP / AUTHORSHIP

“For a collector... ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to things”. (Benjamin, 1931)

The authorship of photographs in the collection are not always straightforward. In case of the collected and found prints, we know they are by anonymous photographers unless signed on the back. It is more complex with Diab’s personal albums, as other people occasionally took pictures with his camera: his wife, Letedal, or his brother or friends.

At times, the ownership is also transitory. The collection belongs to Diab, but within it there are many family albums that were passed on to him as digital copies, as is the case of Baalbeck Family Albums. They were borrowed from the families, scanned and returned to them in an ambitious, self-initiated endeavour undertaken by Diab’s friend, Mr Hakmat Awada, owner of Baalbeck Photo Print Studio. Knowing of Diab’s passion for their city and for photography, he was given a digital copy of the archive and in turn Diab gave me permission to work with them.

We developed a method of working that allowed us to structure our respective personal, intellectual and artistic agendas within clearly divided roles. As the owner of the collection, Diab allowed me to exercise conceptual, artistic, and curatorial freedom over it: a generous gesture and an act of trust. I became a temporary custodian of sorts. The power I have been given over these images when in my care was linked to a responsibility for them. From the start, I have been determined to channel the collection out to a worldwide audience, making it accessible on a physical, intellectual and virtual level.

The muddied authorship of the project (the authorship and an ownership of the archival pictures vs authorship of the work) is reflected in the book’s carefully constructed form. My intention in this book was to conduct work on several levels: to present ‘straight’ stories of the past, to challenge the order of the past and to add a contemporary timeline, so the different temporalities would sit alongside each other. In order to do this the book structures the images in a number of different ways.

AUTHENTICITY

The archive had a vast amount of ephemeral material, annotations made on the backs of the photographs, notes describing the people or place of the images and most importantly, Diab's memory to help establish information about them. Sometimes the dates, places, or names of people changed as Diab returned to talk about some of the photographs. This is the way most people's memory works so I embraced this as one of the characteristics of the collection: until it was officially processed into an archive, the accuracy of information was a shifting territory.

Weaving narratives of either private or public lives, I chose sequences of images that evoked for me a sense of the uncanny that I mentioned before. Many stories in the collection reflect a certain joie de vivre. For example, there are countless images of picnics in Diab's personal albums; a favourite past time in his milieu. They take place on riverbanks, in forests, in parks, in secluded locations where people could relax away from the eyes of strangers. Om Ashad was one of the first stories I 'pulled out of a box'. I saw boys jumping into the river, people getting drunk, laughing, dancing around a blanket, and of course the mesmerising Pasoliniesque central figure of Om Ashad. Swap arak for vodka, this could be Poland in the early 1980s. This joy of life transported me back. Then, I saw one of the young men waving a gun. This was a different realm after all. Diab was amused by my shock. Ania, this is normal in Lebanon, he said. I soon learnt what he meant. Guns are omnipresent in the collection, not just as weapons of war or on hunting trips; people pose with them at weddings, at funerals, at any social gathering, it seems. The other sequences also reflect this difference, and the inseparability of the wider political context in which these images were taken.



Figure 28. Ania Dabrowska, Untitled 13
top left and right: Diab and Ietedal Alkarssifi's wedding day, (photographer unknown), 1983; Diab's mother and a neighbour, Baalbeck, Lebanon by Diab Alkarssifi, 1980s, Collection of Diab Alkarassifi, Drift / Resolution, 2014.



Figure 29. Ania Dabrowska, Untitled 14 clockwise from left: Ibtissam Hariri, local theatre production, 1987; Neighbourhood children playing, 1980s; Ietedal Alkarssifi on her wedding day, 1983, all by Diab Alkarssifi, Baalbeck, Lebanon, Collection of Diab Alkarssifi, Drift/ Resolution, 2014.

Dissemination

PUBLICATIONS

Dabrowska, A. (2015). *A Lebanese Archive.* London: Bookworks & Beirut: Arab Image Foundation.

Dabrowska, A. (2011). ‘A Lebanese Archive’, In: Downey, A. (ed.) *Dissonant Archives. Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 39-48.

Dabrowska, A. (2013). ‘Pierced Memories: The Lebanese Archive of Diab Alkarssifi’. *Jadaliyya Magazine*, Available at: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/28529> (Accessed: 19 December 2020).

EXHIBITIONS

Arlington Portraits and Lebanese Archive of Diab Alkarssifi projects (2011). SPACE Gallery, London.

Conversations About Archive (2013). Four Corners Gallery, London.

A Lebanese Archive (2014). Ashkal Alwan residency, Archive and the city interventions, Conservation experiments at the Arab Image Foundation, Beirut.

From Ear To Ear To Eye (2017-18). Nottingham Contemporary Gallery, Nottingham

A Lebanese Archive (2018). Hoxton Square Poster Space, London. Curated by Mustafa Hulusi, June.

Baalbek, Archives of an Eternity (2019). Sursock Museum, Beirut.





Figure 30. Ania Dabrowska, Installation of artist's work in Mustafa Hulusi Hoxton Square Poster Space, June 2018.

Figure 31. *A Lebanese Archive* projections experimentation at artist's residency, Ashkal Alwan, 2014.

TALKS

Dabrowska, A. (2011). ‘*SPACE STUDIOS VIP Studio Visits’*, Project Presentations To Guests Including: Prince Charles Ambassador of France Tracy Emin Boris Johnson Gefy Images Mayor of Camden Polish Cultural Institute Journalists Arts Council England, Space Studio, London.

Crombie, J., Dabrowska, A., Daw, M.,Matthews, Jenny., Sidlo, S., Demotix. (2012). ‘Can Photography Change Society’. *London Art Fair*, London.

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Dabrowska, A. (2014). ‘A Lebanese Archive’ Notre Dame University, Beirut.

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Dabrowska, A. (2018). ‘By the retelling of archival stories we have the power to articulate new ideas of how we want to formulate our own identities’ Interviewed by Veronika Simpson and Martin Kennedy. *Studio International*, 4 January. Available at: <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/ania-dabrowska-video-interview> (Accessed: 19 December 2020).





Figure 32. Ania Dabrowska, workshop at Notre Dame University, Beirut, 2014.

Figure 33. Adele Watts, Ania Dabrowska chairing Conversation 1, *Conversations About Archive*, Four Corners Gallery, London 2013.

SELECTED PRESS

Bekhard, J. (2015) 'Pictures of You' *Reorient Magazine*, Canada.

Dabrowska, A. (2016) 'Publications: An Excerpt From the Book A Lebanese Archive', *Alkarssifi Jadaliyya Magazine*, Lebanon.

Dabrowski, M. (2014) 'Lost Lebanese Archives Discovered at Homeless Centre', *Culture.pl*, Poland.

De Pietri, C. (2015) 'A Lebanese Archive from the Collection of Diab Alkarssifi by Ania Dabrowska', *Artphilein De Petri Foundation*, Switzerland.

Gulbicki, P (2014) 'Tropem 27 tysiecy zdjec' *Dziennik Polski*, UK.

May, A. (2015) 'Photographs of chaotic lives', *Erotic Review*, UK.

O'Hagan, S. (2014) 'A Lost Lebanon', *The Observer Magazine*, UK.

O'Hagan, S. (2015) 'A Lost Lebanon caught on camera', *The Guardian*, UK.

Padley, G. (2014) 'An archive for modern times', *BJP Online*, UK.

Simpson, V. (2018) 'Ania Dabrowska: By the retelling of archival stories we have the power to articulate new ideas of how we want to formulate our own identities', *Studio International*, UK.

Stoughton, I. (2014) 'Alkarssifi and the lost archive of Baalbek', *Daily Star*, Lebanon.

Sykes, R. (2014) 'A Lebanese Archive by Ania Dabrowska', *Photomonitor*, UK.

Wilk, P. (2014) 'Sto lat codziennosci', *Polityka*, Poland.





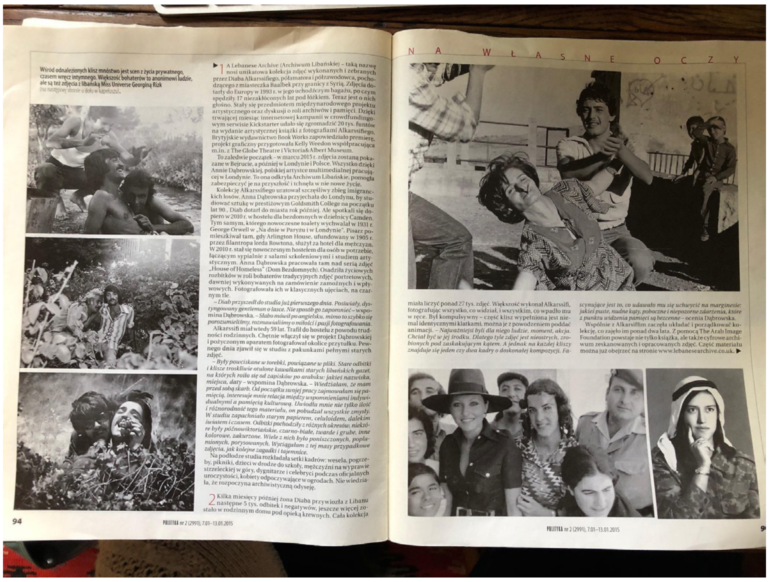


Figure 34. Ania Dabrowska, selection of press, Top: The Observer, 2014, Middle & Bottom: Polityka, 2014.

Impact

In the context of political tension across the Middle East, military actions in Syria and mass migration from the region, the project attracted attention of global media for its portrayal of an alternative view of life in the Middle East that contrasted the dominant representations of conflict. The work has also been recognized for expanding knowledge and engagement with archives in contemporary visual art context through its innovative range of methodologies incorporating archiving, participatory, ethnographic, performative and media strategies into research.

This created a significant framework for the project, and it contributed to ensuring its longevity beyond the immediate news appeal. Its success and impact are evidenced by its dissemination. Since launching, it has been published and showcased to global audiences (the UK, Lebanon, Spain, France, Poland, USA, Switzerland, across the Gulf) through mass media, photography, visual art and culture magazines, exhibitions, art fairs, workshops, artists talks, public lectures and symposia with approximate, combined public reach estimated in hundreds of thousands people.

The collection would have resonated with us differently if we were not so far removed from its place of origin. Within this context of political and military unrest within the region, it is priceless to Diab as an individual and of significant interest on a collective cultural level. This tender, ground level vision which is captured in the collection, is easy to connect to because of our shared narratives. The common nature of many scenes depicted in the photographs makes them instantly familiar because of our own experience of family life and photo albums. Yet, unlike most family albums, next to the shots of people posing for the camera in happy moments, we see all layers of life and a full spectrum of human emotions.

Persistent repetition of similar stories in private albums provides reassurance, perhaps as a way of affirming that despite the terrible times, life continues as normal. Beneath the veil of nostalgia, I wanted to flesh out a distinct poignancy, and political dimension of the images: in sharp contrast to images of violence and war the "mundane" images offer reassurance of better times, and even an escape from reality.



Figure 35. Diab Alkarssifi, A Lebanese Archive, Man.





Figure 36. Ania Dabrowska, Water, Archive 5, Corniche, Beirut, Lebanon, 2014.

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